

# Mencius

## Biography / Overview

Mencius, also known as Mengzi or Meng-tzu, was one of the influential Chinese Confucian philosophers who lived during the Warring States period. He is considered one of the most important Confucian thinkers after Confucius himself (often referred to as the Second Sage). Mencius was born in the state of Zou (now known as Shandong Province) in 371 BCE and is believed to have died around 289 BCE. Little is known about his early life, but he is said to have studied the teachings of Confucius himself, where he spent much of his time traveling to various states, counseling different rulers.

Mencius is best known for his work *Mencius*, a collection of conversations and dialogues with different rulers that expound his ethical and political philosophy. He is often credited with developing Confucian thought (i.e., Confucian Classic) and emphasizing that human nature is full of righteousness and innate goodness. Mencius believed that people are inherently good but can be influenced by their environment and upbringing. His ideas on the importance of moral cultivation and self-improvement have had a lasting impact on Chinese philosophy and ethics.

Despite facing criticism from other schools of thought during his time, Mencius's teachings have continued to influence generations of scholars and thinkers in China and beyond. His emphasis on the cultivation of virtues and the role of government in fostering moral behavior remains relevant in contemporary discussions on ethics and governance.

## Bibliography / Primary Sources

The primary source for Mencius's teachings is the book named *Mencius*, which is a collection of his conversations and dialogues with different rulers compiled by his disciples. This text is considered one of the Four Books of Confucianism and is essential for understanding Mencius's philosophical ideas or principles. In addition to the book, there are several other texts attributed to Mencius, which include commentaries on the Book of Documents and the Book of Odes.

Mencius's teachings have been preserved in multiple ancient Chinese texts, such as the *Records of the Grand Historian* by Sima Qian and the *Zhuangzi* by Zhuang Zhou. These texts provide valuable insights into Mencius's life, thought, and influence on Chinese philosophy. Scholars have studied these primary sources to gain a deeper understanding of Mencius's ethical and political philosophy.

## Documents / Sources:

Mencius. Mencius. Translated by D.C. Lau, Penguin Classics, 2003.

Chan, Wing-tsit. Reflections on Things at Hand: The Neo-Confucian Anthology. Columbia University Press, 1967.

Lau, D.C. "The Mencius." In A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy, edited by Wing-tsit Chan, Princeton University Press, 1963.

Hutton, Eric L. "Mencius." Encyclopaedia Britannica.  
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mencius-Chinese-philosopher>

Ivanhoe, Philip J. "Mencius." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mencius/>

Van Norden, Bryan W. "Mencius." The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2019 Edition).  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/mencius/>

Wikipedia contributors. Mencius. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mencius>

Nivison, David S. "Mencius." Encyclopedia of China: The Essential Reference to China, Its History and Culture, edited by Dorothy Perkins, Facts On File, 1999.

### **Birth Date / Death Date**

Mencius was born in the state of Zou in 371 BCE (present-day: Zoucheng, Shandong) and is believed to have died around 289 BCE. These dates are approximate, as the exact historical records from the Warring States period are scarce, and there is some debate among scholars regarding the exact dates of Mencius's birth and death.

### **Notable / Best-Known For**

Mencius is best known for his ethical and political philosophy, which emphasized that human nature is full of righteousness and innate goodness.

He is considered one of the most important Confucian thinkers after Confucius himself. Mencius's ideas on the importance of benevolence, righteousness, and the role of government in promoting moral behavior have had a lasting impact on Chinese culture and beyond.

One of Mencius's key contributions to Confucianism was his belief in the Four Sprouts of Goodness (i.e., compassion, shame, respect, and right and wrong).

He argued that these virtues are inherent in human nature and can be cultivated through self-reflection and moral education.

Mencius also advocated for the idea of the Mandate of Heaven, which suggests that rulers who govern with benevolence and righteousness will be supported by divine forces.

### **Famous Quotes**

"The great man is he who does not lose his child's-heart." – Mencius, Book IV, Part B, Chapter 12

"Human nature is good, just as water flows downward." – Mencius, Book VI, Part A, Chapter 2

"To exhaust one's mind is to understand one's nature; to understand one's nature is to understand Heaven." – Mencius, Book VII, Part A, Chapter 1

"It is only after a man has refused to do certain things that he is capable of doing great things." – Mencius, Book IV, Part B, Chapter 28

### **Major Works / Textual Contents**

Mencius: Mencius is primarily known for his work Mencius, which is a collection of dialogues and conversations with leaders that expound his ethical and political philosophy. The text is divided into seven books, each focusing on different aspects of Mencius's teachings. In Mencius, he discusses topics such as the innate goodness of human nature, the importance of moral cultivation, the role of government in fostering virtue, and the concept of the Mandate of Heaven.

Book of Documents and the Book of Odes: These are texts attributed to Mencius, which include commentaries providing further insights into Mencius's interpretation of Confucian classics and his views on morality and governance. These writings have been studied by scholars for centuries and continue to be a significant source of inspiration for those interested in Chinese philosophy and ethics.

### **Influences / Intellectual Context**

Significant Intellectual and Cultural Influences: Mencius was heavily influenced by the teachings of Confucius and is often regarded as one of the most important Confucian thinkers in Chinese philosophy. He built upon the ethical and political ideas of Confucius, and his philosophy also drew on the works of earlier Confucian scholars, such as Zengzi and Yan Hui, who were disciples of Confucius.

**Contributions to Fields or Disciplines:** In addition to Confucianism, Mencius engaged in competing Warring States philosophies by debating with scholars from schools of thought such as Mozi and Xunzi, to defend his views on morality and governance. Mencius's interactions with scholars of diverse philosophical backgrounds contributed to the development of his own ethical and political theories.

### **Legacy and Modern Significance**

**Historical Significance:** The legacy of Mencius in Chinese philosophy and culture is significant, as he is considered one of the most important Confucian thinkers in history. In contemporary China, Mencius is still revered as a moral exemplar and a symbol of Confucian values. His ideas shaped traditional Chinese philosophy, ethics, education, and the concept of just government.

**Modern Significance:** Mencius's philosophy and teachings deeply shape Chinese, Korean, and Japanese political thought and ethics even today. His emphasis on the innate goodness of human nature and the importance of moral cultivation has had a lasting impact on Chinese ethical thought. Mencius's ideas continue to be studied and debated by scholars around the world, influencing discussions on virtue ethics, political philosophy, and moral education.

### **Modern Moments / Impact on 21st Century Society**

In 2017, the University of Chicago Press published a new English translation of Mencius's *Mencius* by Philip J. Ivanhoe, bringing his teachings to a wider audience in the 21st century.

Inspired by Mencius, China and South Korea have included Confucian moral education in school textbooks and national curricula since the early 2000s.

The International Society for Chinese Philosophy regularly organizes conferences and symposiums on Mencius's philosophy, showcasing his enduring relevance in contemporary academic discourse.

In philosophy departments around the world—at universities like Oxford, Harvard, and Peking—Mencius is now studied alongside major Western philosophers. In recent years, there has been a growing body of books, journals, and academic discussions comparing Mencius's ideas with Aristotle, Kant, and modern virtue ethicists.

Digital resources, such as online databases and e-books, have made Mencius's works more accessible to a global audience, fostering continued interest in his ethical and political ideas.

### **Suggested Readings and Scholarly Resources**

Ivanhoe, Philip J. "Mencius." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mencius/>

"International Society for Chinese Philosophy."  
<https://chinese-philosophy.org/>

University of Chicago Press. "New Books in East Asian Studies."  
<https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/series/NEAS.html>

Irene Bloom, ed., Mencius. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.